

Chinese military scientists discussed weaponising SARS coronaviruses

EXCLUSIVE

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Chinese military scientists discussed the weaponisation of SARS coronaviruses five years before the COVID-19 pandemic, outlining their ideas in a document that predicted a third world war would be fought with biological weapons.

The document, written by People's Liberation Army scientists and senior Chinese public health officials in 2015, was obtained by the US State Department as it conducted an investigation into the origins of COVID-19, The Weekend Australian has confirmed.

The paper describes SARS coronaviruses as heralding a “new era of genetic weapons” and says they can be “artificially manipulated into an emerging human disease virus, then weaponised and unleashed in a way never seen before”.

The revelation features in an upcoming investigative book on the origins of COVID-19, titled What Really Happened In Wuhan, to be published by HarperCollins.

The chairmen of the British and Australian foreign affairs and intelligence committees, Tom Tugendhat and James Paterson, say the document raises major concerns about China's lack of transparency over the origins of COVID-19.

The Chinese-language paper, titled *The Unnatural Origin of SARS and New Species of Man-Made Viruses as Genetic Bioweapons*, outlines China's progress in the research field of biowarfare.

"Following developments in other scientific fields, there have been major advances in the delivery of biological agents," it states.

"For example, the new-found ability to freeze-dry micro-organisms has made it possible to store biological agents and aerosolise them during attacks."

Some of China's senior public health and military figures are listed among the 18 authors of the document, including the former deputy director of China's Bureau of Epidemic Prevention, Li Feng. Ten of the authors are scientists and weapons experts affiliated with the Air Force Medical University in Xi'an, ranked "very high-risk" for its level of defence research, including its work on medical and psychological sciences, according to the Australian Strategic Policy Institute's Defence Universities Tracker.

The Air Force Medical University, also known as the Fourth Medical University, was placed under the command of the PLA under President Xi Jinping's military reforms in 2017. The editor-in-chief of the paper, Xu Dezhong, reported to the top leadership of the Chinese Military Commission and Ministry of Health during the SARS epidemic of 2003, briefing them 24 times and preparing three reports, according to his online biography.

He also held the position of professor and doctoral supervisor in the Air Force Medical University's Military Epidemiology Department.

Other authors include Zhang Jiangxia and Zhao Ningning, who both served as experiment scientists in the same department.

Intelligence agencies suspect COVID-19 may be the result of an inadvertent leak from a Wuhan laboratory, a line of inquiry under active investigation since early 2020. There is no evidence to suggest it was intentionally released.

Robert Potter, a digital forensics specialist who has worked for the US, Australian and Canadian governments, and has previously analysed leaked Chinese government documents, verified the authenticity of the paper.

“We were able to verify its authenticity as a document authored by the particular PLA researchers and scientists stated,” Mr Potter, the co-chief executive of Internet 2.0, said. “We were able to locate its genesis on the Chinese internet.”

There is concern about the high-risk nature of the biological research into coronaviruses Wuhan scientists were conducting, particularly involving “Gain of Function” research where virologists create new viruses that are more transmissible and more lethal. Australian Strategic Policy Institute executive director Peter Jennings said under Mr Xi's increasing emphasis on civil-military fusion, China's biological research into coronaviruses could be weaponised.

“There is no clear distinction for research capability because whether it's used offensively or defensively is not a decision these scientists would take,” he said.

“If you are building skills ostensibly to protect your military from a biological attack, you’re at the same time giving your military a capacity to use these weapons offensively. You can’t separate the two.”

The document offers an insight into the way senior scientists at one of the PLA’s most prominent military universities were thinking about biological research development.

It notes how a sudden surge of patients requiring hospitalisation during a bioweapon attack “could cause the enemy’s medical system to collapse”.

The document refers to the research of Michael J. Ainscough, a former US Air Force colonel, on modes of conflict and bioweapons.

That research explains “next-generation bioweapons” as part of a US Air Force program aimed at better preparing American national security policymakers and senior members of the military to counter the threat from weapons of mass destruction.

Drawing on Colonel Ainscough’s research, the authors conclude a third world war “will be biological” and that “the core weapon for victory in World War Three will be bioweapons”.

“Colonel Ainscough’s conclusion states: “There are those who say the First World War was chemical, the Second World War was nuclear, and that the Third World War — God forbid — will be biological,” it reads.

“There are two meanings to this: Firstly, the First and Second World Wars were chemical and nuclear wars respectively; and the Third World War will certainly be a biological war.

“Secondly, advanced weapons are the key factor in determining the fate of World War III. Colonel Ainscough probably believed that the two atomic bombs forced Japan to surrender, laying the foundation for victory in World War II; so, the core weapon for victory in World War III will be bioweapons”.

The study also examines the optimum conditions under which to release a bioweapon. “Bioweapon attacks are best conducted during dawn, dusk, night or cloudy weather because intense sunlight can damage the pathogens,” it states. “Biological agents should be released during dry weather. Rain or snow can cause the aerosol particles to precipitate.

“A stable wind direction is desirable so that the aerosol can float into the target area.”

Among the most bizarre claims by the military scientists is their theory that SARS-CoV-1, the virus that caused the SARS epidemic of 2003, was a man-made bioweapon, deliberately unleashed on China by “terrorists”.

Scientific consensus holds that SARS-CoV-1 was of natural origin, having crossed the xenographic barrier from Asian palm civets to humans, likely through the sale of wild animals in wet markets in Guangdong province, southern China. The 263-page paper was published in 2015 by the Chinese Military Medical Science Press, a Chinese government-owned publishing house managed by the General Logistics Department of the PLA.

The Weekend Australian has confirmed the paper was then obtained by senior officials at the US State Department in May 2020, who were investigating the origins of the pandemic.

Former secretary of state Mike Pompeo and his chief China adviser, Miles Yu, made a passing reference to it in their Wall Street Journal op-ed in February

on China's laboratories, writing: "A 2015 PLA study treated the 2003 SARS coronavirus outbreak as a 'contemporary genetic weapon' launched by foreign forces."

After this, the paper circulated among Chinese dissident communities online.

Luke de Pulford, the co-ordinator of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China, also received the document and said that while many Chinese papers came across his desk, this one "stuck out". "If this piece of work is representative of the scientific thinking of those who have advised the top leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, then there are very serious questions which need urgent answers," he said.

Mr Tugendhat said: "China's evident interest in bioweapons is extremely concerning.

"Even under the tightest controls these weapons are dangerous. This document raises major concerns about the ambitions of some of those who advise the top party leadership."

Senator Paterson said "these revelations demonstrate exactly why nothing less than complete transparency from the Chinese Communist Party is required about the origins of COVID-19".

"The Chinese government's failure to fully co-operate with the WHO investigation does nothing to instil confidence in what we have been told so far," he said.

"Only they can dispel speculation about alternative theories of the cause of this pandemic."

World Health Organisation director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has previously said there needs to be further investigation into the possibility of a lab accident in Wuhan, criticising his own team's inquiry — that claimed a lab leak was unlikely — for not being thorough or extensive.

“Although the team has concluded that a laboratory leak is the least likely hypothesis, this requires further investigation, potentially with additional missions involving specialist experts, which I am ready to deploy,” Dr Tedros said on March 31.

“The team also visited several laboratories in Wuhan and considered the possibility that the virus entered the human population as a result of a laboratory incident.

“However, I do not believe that this assessment was extensive enough. Further data and studies will be needed to reach more robust conclusions.”

In 2020, the US State Department produced its annual report on arms control agreements which noted: “China continues to develop its biotechnology infrastructure and pursue scientific co-operation with countries of concern.

“The United States has compliance concerns with respect to Chinese military medical institutions' toxin research and development because of the potential dual-use applications and their potential as a biological threat.”

Citing a past US government treaty compliance report, the Arms Control Association, an NGO promoting public understanding of, and support for, effective arms control policies, reported that China, along with North Korea, Iran and Syria, had “flagrantly violated” the convention: “The convention has been flagrantly violated in the past ... the US government listed, in addition to

Russia, (Biological Weapons Convention) states-parties China, Iran, and North Korea, as well as BWC signatory Syria, as possessing offensive biological weapons in violation of the treaty.”

What Really Happened In Wuhan by Sharri Markson will be published by HarperCollins in September and is available for [pre-order from Booktopia now](#).

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Sharri Markson is the Investigations Writer at The Australian and host of “Sharri” on Sky News Australia. She is a two-time Walkley Award winner, the recipient of the 2018 Sir Keith Murdoch Award for Excellence... [Read more](#)

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